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News Release

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Feb. 17, 2000
No. 00-02-17
For Release: IMMEDIATELY

Long-term lack of rainfall is the only cause of low water at Philpott Lake, US Army Corps of Engineers hydrologist says

WILMINGTON, North Carolina—"There's just one reason Philpott Lake continues lower than normal—and that's low inflows over a long period," said U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Hydrologist Terry Brown. "We want members of the public to know that other reasons they may hear of for the low water are strictly rumors." According to Philpott Project Manager Carl Smith, he has received calls from members of the public concerned about everything from leaks in the dam to water releases intended to meet the needs of far away Virginia Beach.

"The rumors just aren't true," Brown said. "The dam is certainly sound, and is inspected on a regular basis. We also carefully monitor all inflows and control all outflows from the lake. As explained in earlier news stories, outflows are being held to the minimum needed to meet fishery and water quality needs."

"The inflows tell the story—when very little is coming in, the result is that the lake stays low or falls even lower. Every single month from June 1998 until today has seen below-normal inflows coming into the lake. Worse, over the past 20 months, inflows have been less than 50 percent of normal. The rain deficit over the past 20 months amounts to 20 inches of rain. Even though predictions for this spring are for normal levels of rainfall, that will not make up for the losses of the past two years. Philpott Lake is simply going to stay low over the spring and summer."

As for releases to meet power production requirements, the dam has cut back to one hour of releases, seven days a week, with the help of the Corps' John H. Kerr Dam and the cooperation of the power company."

Unfortunately, we don't see an early end to the dry conditions that are causing the low levels at Philpott Lake," said Brown. The lake is currently at 957 feet, nearly 14 feet lower than the desired normal level.

Since the reservoir and dam were built, recreational uses of the lake have become an important part of the community scene and a boost to local tourism. Boaters and marina operators have been frustrated by low water that has made it necessary to close down boat ramps and curtail marina operations. "We will be building temporary extensions on some of our key boat ramp facilities to ensure that boaters can still have access to the lake for fishing and recreational boating," Smith said. "We encourage boaters to call ahead and make sure of the best places to launch their boats."

The lake created behind the dam can also help to alleviate water quality problems that can arise from drought, by making releases and keeping the Smith River from slowing to a trickle. "Like every thing man makes to control nature," Brown said, "this dam can exercise some influence, but it can't reverse natural conditions entirely. We are in a long-term drought similar to the droughts experienced in the 1950s and 1960s. Until there is a lot more water in the whole region of the Smith River Basin—a 550-square mile area--we are going to be seeing lower water levels in Philpott Lake."

People interested in keeping tabs on daily conditions at Philpott Lake can find real time data on precipitation, inflows, outflows and lake levels for Philpott and all the Wilmington District's other lake projects at www.saw.usace.army.mil. On the home page, choose "Wilmington District Links" and then select "Water levels," to find the project you wish to follow.